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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Joseph Laitin

Unfair Treatment

Now that 1986 is out of the way, there is the temptation—almost an obligation—to look at last year's headlines and take stock. What comes to mind are two cases of unfair treatment to defenseless individuals in unrelated stories. This ombudsman dealt with them at the time in internal memos addressed to editors and staff. Looking back, they should have been discussed publicly in this column.

One of the offended people shall remain anonymous here to avoid further embarrassment, but the other case is a matter of public record.

On Nov. 4, The Post published an article prominently displayed at the top of page one. It concerned a career civil service professional in the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency who was accused of security violations. The

Ombudsman

article reported that the employee, Kathleen Strang, was accused of mishandling sensitive top-secret documents, including some concerning Pakistan's efforts to build a nuclear weapon. Adjacent to this article was another story, written by the same reporter, Bob Woodward, about Pakistan's "dramatic progress" toward production of an A-bomb. There was an implied linkage between the two stories.

The article about Kathleen Strang stated that an agency security panel had recommended that her clearances be permanently revoked. It also reported that she had appealed this decision to the director of the agency, Kenneth Adelman.

On Nov. 9, The Post carried a letter to the editor from her attorney, David E. McGiffert, stating that the allegations concerned failure fully to comply with certain internal document-handling procedures. He described his client as a woman who had served the agency for 12 years with a spotless security record and whose loyalty had never been questioned. He said she could not respond to The

Post's request for information for the original story because of a lawsuit pending against the agency.

The next day, director Adelman reversed the ruling of the security panel. He restored her top-secret clearance, with certain restrictions, and suspended her for six months without pay.

This was an interesting decision, but this was hardly a John Walker espionage case—more likely a knuckle-rapping infraction that deserved disciplinary action inside the agency. It hardly rated the attention given it by The Post. Worse, nothing appeared in The Post about director Adelman's reversal of the security panel's decision.

There is one unique aspect to this story. Bob Woodward of Watergate fame, who wrote the article about Kathleen Strang but, of course, was not responsible for the prominent display it was given nor its juxtaposition to the sensational story suggesting Pakistan was about to join the world nuclear club, is a reporter who has achieved unparalleled status in the annals of American journalism. His signature over an article about an allegation of a misstep in government is to many tantamount to a grand jury indictment; a reputation that contributed to the grievance of Kathleen Strang.

The second injustice involved a routine news item about the retirement after 25 years of an executive who is highly respected in his industry. This otherwise unremarkable story ended with the gratuitous observation that the outgoing executive was "known for his incomprehensible presentation of . . . facts and figures," which, to say the least, was totally irrelevant. It should have been blue-penciled out of a gossip column.

The ombudsman phoned the victim's deputy to determine whether a public comment in this column would cause new anguish. His advice: forget it. But he offered a fascinating sidelight. His boss was a member of the prestigious Metropolitan Club, stronghold of the white power elite in the capital. A member had torn the item from the page, thumbtacked it to the bulletin board in the lobby and written above it: "Welcome to the Club." As the day wore on, other members added their comments, some, with obvious relish, signing their names. This apparently more than made up for the discomfort caused by the insulting mention in The Post.

What stayed with me was that these comments, so gleefully written by the club members who represented white power, were not unlike the criticisms that have been sounded recently by the privileged and underprivileged of the black community.